

## **The Fourth Korea Foundation Global Seminar**

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### ***Globalizing United States-Republic of Korea Relations***

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### **"The Evolution of Combined Forces Command"**

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***A Presentation by General (Retired) B. B. Bell***

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Today I want to address the Evolution of Combined Forces Command, or CFC. This is not a bureaucratic military issue. It's viewed by many as an issue at the heart of the vibrancy of the Security Alliance between the Republic of Korea and the United States. Today, Combined Forces Command is the Combined Warfighting Headquarters between the Republic of Korea and the United States with the purpose of leading combat operations to defend South Korea from attack.

In line with a succession of military command and control agreements since the beginning of the Korean War, the United States has habitually provided the Commander of CFC; while the Republic of Korea (or ROK if you will allow me) provides the Deputy Commander. At the outbreak of hostilities, all military forces, both Korean and American, are to be placed under the Wartime Operational Control of the Commander of CFC. Staff officers are generally split about evenly between the two nations in the headquarters, while the United States provides much of the technical warfighting command, control, communications and intelligence apparatus.

By mutual agreement and as directed in the June 2009 Joint Vision Statement by President Lee, Myung-bak and President Barack Obama, Wartime Operational Control of South

Korean military forces will shift from Combined Forces Command to the Republic of Korea Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) in December, 2015. Combined Forces Command will be disestablished and a new U.S. complementary warfighting command, known as Korea Command or KORCOM, will be activated to exercise operational Control of U.S. forces in support of South Korea's JCS and South Korean forces.

What this means is that CFC will be replaced with a South Korean led warfighting headquarters, with United States forces in support. As such, a South Korean four star military officer, Korea's Chairman of the JCS, will be in command of South Korean military forces in any future war in defense of the nation, while the United States commander will provide American forces to support mutually agreed upon war plans, capability and operations.

For the first time since the beginning of the Korean War in 1950, a fully sovereign South Korean national military headquarters will be responsible for leading the defense of the nation. What won't change, however, will be the absolute commitment of the United States to the defense of Korea. And most importantly, the Mutual Security Treaty signed by both parties in 1953 will remain fully in force. If the Republic of Korea is attacked, the United States will come to its aid with the necessary full measure and weight of our military capability.

To make all this military jargon a little more understandable, let me go back a bit in history. It's important and won't take long. Following the 25 June 1950 attack on South Korea by the north, three United Nations Resolutions quickly called for member states to assist South Korea in repelling the attack, while also authorizing the U.S. to designate the commander of a unified force under the United Nations – to be named "The United Nations Command." Throughout the war and until 1978, the UN Command maintained Operational Control of UN Sending States' forces. Those are the UN member nations who had agreed to contribute to the ongoing defense effort. All these forces were under the leadership of a U.S. four star general. In 1978, The ROK-US Combined Forces Command (or CFC) was established as the new warfighting command, with only ROK and U.S. forces, with no other UN forces under its day to day operational control.

Following the establishment of CFC, The United Nations Command remained active, as it does today, but with the reduced and singular mission of continuing to enforce the ongoing 27 July 1953 Armistice Agreement, which had been signed by the three military leaders of the warring parties – the United States on behalf of the UN Command, north Korea, and China. The bottom line was that in 1978 the U.S. Commander of the United Nations Command (UNC) was also designated and dual-hatted as the Commander of CFC.

The result of all this was a CFC headquarters wherein only the U.S. and the Republic of Korea were actively preparing to fight to defend South Korea, while the United Nations Command, today with sixteen member countries, shifted its focus then and now to the day to day maintenance of the Armistice Agreement only. So, should the Armistice fail and hostilities begin today, the UN Command Member States, other than the US and South Korea, must decide to either withdraw their representation from South Korea, or agree to contribute to the war effort either on the ground in South Korea, or from the United Nations Command Rear Headquarters in Yakota, Japan.

So to reiterate, in 1978 two key defense commands were present in the ROK; The United Nations Command, focused on the Armistice Agreement, and the Combined Forces Command focused on preparing to defend South Korea should the north attack. Both were and are led by the same dual-hatted U.S. four star general. All South Korean and American Forces

in South Korea were then, that is in 1978, placed under both the peacetime and potential wartime operational command and control of CFC, and, as such, the U.S. Commander. Because of this, South Korea's readiness to fight was ultimately the responsibility of the American Commander.

The evolution of command and control arrangements in South Korea continued with another significant change in 1994. During that year, all South Korean forces during day to day peacetime conditions (or more properly stated under day to day ongoing Armistice conditions) were returned to the Operational Control of the Republic of Korea. This is referred to by many as "Peacetime OPCON." South Korean forces were severed from CFC during the continued Armistice period and the CFC Commander was no longer ultimately responsible for the fighting readiness of South Korean Forces. South Korea, as a sovereign nation, assumed this responsibility.

Simply stated, in 1994 the Republic of Korea assumed full responsibility for training, maintaining, and equipping all its forces day to day during Armistice. Thus, since then, only at the expected outbreak of war and with the approval of both nations, are South Korean military forces to be placed under CFC.

Meanwhile since 1978 and continuing to this day, CFC Headquarters plans, trains, and exercises as the principal Alliance warfighting headquarters. It has no day to day assigned forces. The U.S. forces in Korea are under the command of the Commander of US Forces, Korea, known as USFK; while day to day the South Korean Forces are under the command of ROK JCS, and their respective military service Chiefs of Staff. However and fairly frequently, CFC has forces from both the United States and South Korea temporarily assigned during peacetime for exercise purposes. Thus when you read about exercises such as Key Resolve, Foal Eagle, Ulchi Freedom Guardian, and others, both South Korea and the United States will temporarily loan their forces to CFC Headquarters, only to be returned to the command and control of the respective nations (that is to ROK JCS and USFK) on completion of the exercise.

And don't forget, strategic and even some operational war plans and activities are not the single purview of the American CFC Commander. Not at all. Indeed, since 1978 the U.S. Commander has received his instructions from a higher order Military Committee led by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of both the Republic of Korea and the United States; as well as from Security Consultative Meetings led by the Minister of National Defense of the Republic of Korea and the Secretary of Defense of the United States. Both of these forums, the MCM and the SCM, gain their national level guidance from the respective Presidents of both countries. So as you can see, the U.S. Commander of CFC is not a "Lone Ranger"; he is, rather, a military commander under the firm direction and guidance of both nations' political and military leaders in a consultative manner.

Now, following the 1994 peacetime return of operational control of South Korean forces to full South Korean sovereign control, our leaders agreed that the next step was to arrange for the transfer of Wartime Operational Control from CFC to the Republic of Korea. So, the return of wartime OPCON to a sovereign South Korea has been the goal of the two Allies for many years. Today, the military and political leaders of both countries feel that with the large and vibrant South Korean economy, the excellence of its armed forces, and the high quality of its military leaders, the Republic of Korea is more than ready to successfully command and lead its own forces in any future war, and, with the support of the United States, quickly and decisively defeat any attack by north Korea.

There have been several scheduled, postponed, and rescheduled times to do this over the past several years. Most recently, the transfer of Wartime OPCON was scheduled for April 2012, just a couple of months ago; however, following the two lethal military provocations by north Korea – the sinking of the warship Cheonan and the artillery shelling of Yeonpyeong Island – by mutual agreement the planned transfer was postponed until December of 2015. This OPCON transfer plan was signed by the two nations in October 2010 and is expressed in what is known as The Strategic Alliance 2015 Plan. Central to the Strategic Alliance 2015 Plan are the following provisions:

- First, change ROK-U.S. military command structures to enable the transfer of Wartime OPCON of ROK forces to the ROK JCS in December of 2015; while transitioning the current non-warfighting U.S. Forces Korea Headquarters, USFK, into a full U.S. complementary warfighting headquarters to be known as Korea Command or KORCOM.

- Second, develop and execute bilateral realistic military plans and exercises based on the full range of possible north Korean actions including provocations, instability and direct attack. Do this with the ROK JCS as the supported command, with KORCOM in a military doctrinally supporting role.

- Third, develop additional ROK military capabilities that better enable South Korea to accept the warfighting lead for its country.

- And last, consolidate for greater efficiencies U.S. forces into two enduring hubs around Pyeongtaek and Daegu.

Many who are not fully in favor of the transfer of wartime OPCON have for years criticized the plan across a range of issues. There are principally three concerns:

- First, opponents state that the Republic of Korea is not, nor will it be, militarily ready to assume the warfighting lead mission by 2015.

- Second, the development of two separate and complementary warfighting commands (the ROK JCS and KORCOM) will destroy the unity of command now enjoyed by the two nations and will lead to great risk and potential defeat at the hands of the north Koreans.

- And third, once America transfers wartime OPCON of the Korean military to the ROK JCS, America may unilaterally withdraw key forces from the peninsula and weaken the Alliance, thus leaving South Korea to its own devices and vulnerable in the face of a belligerent north Korea, a growing China, and an uncertain Russia.

ROK and US political and military leaders have aggressively and publically addressed all three of these issues, yet there is still discomfort by some that one or more of the issues could prove the undoing of South Korea by emboldening north Korea to attack. Many look back historically on US Secretary of State Dean Acheson's infamous speech on 12 January 1950 to the American National Press Club in Washington which arguably left South Korea out of America's so called "defensive perimeter" as illustrative of the risks associated with sending signals of weakness to other nations in northeast Asia.

While there may be some truth in historically assessing America's stance on 12 January 1950, no one can argue about America's unwavering commitment when examining our

response to North Korea's attack on 25 June, 1950. We did not hesitate and we went to war on behalf of our friends, the people of South Korea. Further, through the period of the Cold War centered in Europe, the Vietnam War, the first Gulf War, and the past ten years of two wars, American has never wavered in its commitment to our friend and ally, the Republic of Korea.

And, our demonstrated strong and unwavering commitment has never been based on the existence of a military headquarters, such as the Combined Forces Command. Our Mutual Security Treaty leaves military command and control relationships up to the two nations to establish and modify as necessary to ensure the Alliance has appropriate warfighting teeth. As I have explained, command and control relationships have been changed and modified many times since the outbreak of the Korean War. On transfer of Wartime OPCON to ROK JCS, a supporting (that's KORCOM) to supported (that's ROK JCS) battlefield relationship is well described in military doctrine, results in both unity of command and unity of effort at appropriate levels, and ensures necessary flexibility to meet the rapidly changing requirements of any warfight. I am very confident that there is no warfighting risk associated with the transfer of Wartime OPCON.

Ladies and gentlemen, our Alliance has always been based on our mutual respect, admiration, and the common interests between the people of South Korea and the United States. Indeed America's alliance with South Korea may be stronger now than at any time in history – note President Obama's recent strategic pivot to the Asian region as evidence. And current geo-political realities in northeast Asia assure everyone, especially America and the Republic of Korea, that our alliance will remain strong, multi-faceted, and continue to grow throughout this century and beyond.

So, the two allies are continuing a long history of effectively transitioning military command and control organizations to accommodate the maturation of the relationship between our two great nations. Throughout this process, the United States has never wavered in our enduring military, economic, diplomatic, and cultural partnership with South Korea. North Korea knows this, China knows this, and Russia knows this. They know it now, and they will continue to know it once the Republic of Korea assumes Wartime OPCON of its own national forces.

South Korea is one of the world's leading sovereign countries. It is right and proper that, with the assured military support of America, it lead its own forces in defense of its great country. Through it all the United States will stay true to its written Security Treaty word.

Yet let there be no doubt, the future of the Alliance between South Korea and the United States will not draw its vitality from military command and control arrangements, not specific words of our treaty. Indeed, the future of the Alliance between South Korea and America does today and will in the future hinge on one great set of words. If we waver, our destiny is in doubt. If we embrace them our destiny together is assured. Our path to the future is simple and clear; Katchi Kapshida – We go together. And together we shall continue throughout this century and beyond.

I look forward to addressing your questions.

*Please see next page for an acronym key.*

## ACRONYM KEY

CFC – Combined Forces Command. The current South Korea and United States Warfighting Headquarters in Seoul, South Korea. Commanded by a U.S. four star general.

JCS – Joint Chiefs of Staff. The senior military leaders of a country, normally headed by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, or CJCS.

KORCOM – Korea Command. The future U.S. warfighting headquarters to be stationed in South Korea.

MCM – Military Committee Meeting. A military meeting between the South Korean Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the United States Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and their representatives.

OPCON – Operational Control. A military term establishing who has the authority to issue orders and instructions to military units.

ROK – The Republic of Korea, frequently used interchangeably with South Korea.

SCM – Security Consultative Meeting. A mutual defense meeting between the South Korean Minister of National Defense and the United States Secretary of Defense and their representatives.

UNC – The United Nations Command. The United Nations Headquarters currently located in South Korea. Commanded by the same U.S. General who leads Combined Forces Command (CFC).

USFK – United States Forces Korea. United States Headquarters in Seoul, South Korea in charge of all American forces on behalf of the United States.